

Community Environmental Health Assessments: Challenges and Successes in WA State



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Today's Key Objectives

- Explain why CEHAs are important in Washington State
- List the barriers and challenges
- Illustrate some successful examples
- Explain the next steps

Context: The WSBOH

Purpose

- Adopt rules & regulations
- Develop health policy
- Provide a public forum

10 Members

Current EH issues (www.sboh.wa.gov)

- Environmental Justice
- Environmental Health Rules

Why are CEHAs important?

- A policy maker's challenge
- Environmental health policy development
- The Issue: "Truth"
- Linkage with the Essential Services

The 10 Essential Services

1. Monitor environmental & health status (-)
2. Diagnose & investigate health problems (+/-)
3. Inform, educate & empower people (+)
4. Mobilize community partnerships (-)
5. Develop policies and plans (+/-)
6. Enforce laws and regulations (+)
7. Link people to health services (+/-)
8. Assure a competent workforce (+)
9. Evaluate effectiveness & quality (-)
10. Research for new insights (-)

The WSBOH Assessment Project

- **Project Goals**
 - ✓ **Understand interactions between agencies and community groups**
 - ✓ **Identify use of CEHAs (e.g., PACE-EH)**
 - ✓ **Identify examples of EH leadership**
 - ✓ **Develop recommendations & implementation ideas**

Project Process

- **Key informant group interviews**
 - Local EH Directors
 - Local community assessment coordinators
 - Tribal health planner
 - Department of Health
 - Department of Ecology
 - Seattle EJ Needs Assessment & Island County EHAT
 - Other agency and community members
- **Develop and report recommendations to the State Board of Health**

Findings

- **Very few EH units perform formal CEHAs**
- **There are few models of how to do CEHAs**
- **There is little collaboration between EH staff and public health community assessment staff**
- **Most EH staff don't have the funding, time, or training to do community assessments**
- **EH priorities are determined primarily by regulations, local BOH, outbreaks, trends in news media, or by “squeaky wheel” concerns**

Findings (cont'd)

- EH staff know and use agencies & community partners, but on an issue-specific basis
- Most public health community assessment staff use surveys (e.g., BRFSS) to acquire community data, but there are very few EH questions in these surveys
- Some EH staff use parts of PACE-EH, community health advisory boards, epidemiologic assessment methods, and interviews to acquire community input
- EH units desire environmental indicators to perform community assessments

Barriers

- Lack of capacity
- Lack of time
- Lack of “champions”
- Resistance to change driven by fear
- Competing priorities
- Lack of understanding what assessment is and what it can do
- Lack of data (i.e., environmental indicators)

Success Stories

- **Island County Health Department**
 - Used PACE EH to develop community identified issues
 - Water quality, WNV, Littering, Walkable Island Co.
 - Community members are equal partners
- **Seattle Public Utilities**
 - Addressed environmental issues in local communities by involving youth, elderly, and non-English speaking groups
 - Went to the community – fairs, schools, homes
 - Issues identified and addressed: household hazardous waste, multi-unit housing

Reasons for Success

- **Leadership and vision**
- **Community is an equal partner**
- **Dedicated staff**
- **Departments are committed and find a way to make it happen**
- **Access to key supports**

SBOH Recommendations

1. Support funding of community environmental health assessment processes. For example, explicitly add community mobilization and qualitative data collection into the Public Health Improvement Plan's cost model for essential public health services.
2. Develop capacity to perform community environmental health assessment, including components such as:
 - Collecting qualitative and quantitative data on environmental factors that impact health
 - Identifying community values, perspectives, and concerns
 - Providing culturally and linguistically appropriate environmental education
 - Community involvement and mobilization.

SBOH Recommendations

3. Develop agency and community capacity to address needs identified by community environmental health assessments and action plans.
4. Develop a menu of accessible, relevant, and community driven environmental health indicators, which include a broad spectrum of environmental factors that impact human health.
5. Incorporate environmental factors that impact health into existing community health assessment processes and surveys such as the Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System Survey.

SBOH Recommendations

6. Identify relevant data, tools, expertise, and assistance available for CEHA processes. Provide information on CEHA tools, methods, mentors, and best practices through Assessment in Action AssessNow web site and other communication channels.
7. Encourage training of agency staffs and community partners in community health assessment processes that integrate environmental health with other public health programs.
8. Request that agency staffs and community members provide feedback on environmental health data and concerns identified by CEHAs to boards of health and other policy makers.